



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO ALLEVIATE JAPAN'S FERTILITY CRISIS

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this research paper is to carry out an extensive and nuanced investigation on how cross-country cultural differences may have a possible influence on how fertility rates respond to policy interventions. This paper will provide a comparative analysis in regards to the fertility issues observed in the Japanese and French population.

This research will analyze the lessons that Japanese policy makers can obtain from policy interventions in France that have led to a recent rise in the fertility rate. My research will primarily rely on a comparative analysis framework to gather substantial and relevant information and perspectives through the reviewing of various excerpts of qualitative and quantitative data obtained from scientific journals and expert studies pertaining to fertility and cultural issues within the two countries. The paper will explore various aspects of fertility policies, including economic incentives, family support systems, and work-life balance initiatives, to understand their impact in different cultural contexts.

The results of the research indicate that the overworking work-culture in Japan may have a significant influence on the trends observed in Japanese fertility rates. Though effective policy interventions have been shown to positively impact fertility rates in France, such regulatory action has not been nearly as effective in Japan. These findings suggest that Japan must focus on addressing an underlying cultural issue that may not be as prevalent, or even observed, in other countries, which is its dysfunctional work culture. The Japanese, therefore, cannot merely model their fertility regulations after the French as such actions would not address the core issue to Japan's low fertility.

**KEYWORDS:** Fertility, Natalists, Demographic Change

## INTRODUCTION

Japan has been experiencing a significant drop in population and fertility rates since the 1980s (Nagase, 2018). This drop in Japanese fertility rates can be attributed to multiple different reasons including lack of childcare services (Nagase, 2018), increasing women's status over time (Feyrer et al., 2008), and economic and social concerns caused by low wages and declining interest in relationships and sex (Piser, 2023). These fertility rate drops, however, are not constrained to Japan. The majority of high-income countries have seen a significant decline in fertility rates and population growth as women began gaining more access to the labor market (Bloom et al., 2013). These drops in fertility rates that are experienced by many industrialized and advanced countries are mainly caused by social interaction processes, demographic distortions, institutional settings, and economic and social changes (ibid). As a result of these demographic changes, many high-income countries are experiencing a surging increase in old age population as the ratio of working to non-working-age people dissipates (ibid), weakening the overall strength of the labor force and increasing the dependency ratio. Therefore, many governments are attempting to implement policies to incentivize having children in order to boost population growth and fertility rates (Bloom et al., 2013; Piser, 2023). These pieces of evidence show that the benefits brought about by the

drop in fertility rates are only temporary, later on being offset by the negative consequences brought about in the long run as the population ages.

The aim of this research paper is to provide a comparative analysis between fertility rate trends in France and Japan and the approaches aimed to fix the fertility crisis. What lessons can Japanese policy makers take from policy interventions in France that have led to a recent rise in the fertility rate? How may cross-country cultural differences influence how fertility rates respond to policy interventions?

The Japanese government has recognized receding fertility rates as a significant problem and has attempted to solve this issue by speeding up daycare supplies and increasing childcare allowances (Nagase, 2018), aiming to provide parents with a better work-life balance. Furthermore, policies aimed to increase paternal involvement in raising a child have been implemented. Increased paternal leave and lower working hours have also been enforced (Feyrer et al., 2008; Nagase, 2018). Policies to increase women leaders in firms have also been implemented to promote gender equality.

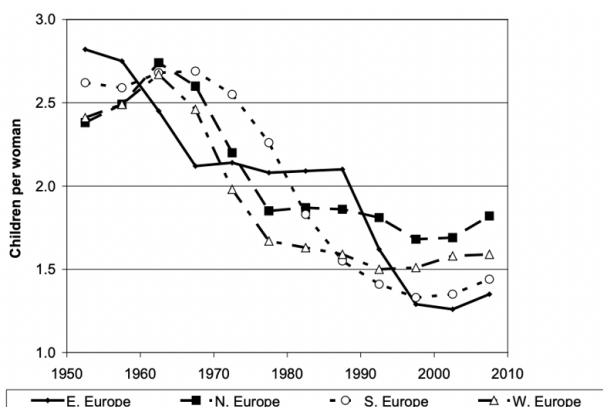
Despite such policies and incentives, fertility rates remain low as the Japanese population continues to age. 40% of those that

have been offered to take up to 1 year's leave without the risk of losing their jobs still continue to quit their jobs (Nagase, 2018), while overtime and leave rates of fathers still remain stagnant (ibid). These statistics may imply that there are underlying cultural and social implications, possibly unhealthy work cultures or harmful social stigmas, that have a greater effect on influencing Japanese fertility rates, rather than the obvious monetary incentives.

In contrast to Japan's fertility issues, France, on the other hand, has seen a consistent increase in fertility rates since 1995, even pushing them to have the highest fertility rates in Europe as of 2019, with a number of 1.88 births per woman as of 2008 (Volant et al., 2019). Despite experiencing drops in fertility rates in the early 1990s, multiple policies have been implemented by the government to address the issue (Letablier, 2003). Government incentives aimed at promoting a better work-life balance have been one of the main reasons for the rise in fertility rates. Increased household participation, and increased childcare services have all been major contributory factors in boosting fertility (Feyrer et al., 2008). Moreover, the migration of many immigrants into France has slightly improved birth rates as well. Contributing to over 12% of the female population of childbearing age and adding 0.1 children to the overall fertility rate in France. Though not highly influential, the small percentage of immigrants affecting fertility rates may set a framework for other countries to follow in an attempt to boost fertility.

In the subsequent sections, we will be discussing the economic consequences of having low fertility rates. After which, we will examine the extent to which cultural forces can shape fertility rates. Moving forward, an analysis will be conducted on the dissimilar fertility conditions in Japan and France, which will be accompanied with a comparative analysis on the policies and responses observed from both regions. Finally, policy recommendations will be provided to suggest optimal actions the government should take to boost fertility.

Though it may initially seem beneficial, demographic changes caused by low fertility rates may pose harmful economic consequences in the long run.



Source: United Nations Population Division, 2009. *World Population Prospects* online data.

As can be observed from the graph above, almost all European regions have had fertility rates below the long term-replacement

rates since the 1990s (Bloom et al., 2013). Long term-replacement rate is defined as the number of children that a couple would have to have over the course of their reproductive years in order to replace themselves (energyeducation, n.d.), exposing them to the possible long-term economic consequences.

At first, low fertility rates often provide countries with the benefit of having a stronger workforce. As fertility declines, the labor force begins to grow at a higher rate than the dependent population (Lee and Mason, 2006). Dependent population is defined as that part of the population that does not work and relies on others for the goods and services they consume (eaber.org, n.d.). As a result, resources are now freed for investment in other productive factors such as public healthcare, education and government subsidies, rather than supporting the dependent population. Hence, a temporary boost in the working-age population can increase economic output per capita (Bloom et al., 2009).

This presents the country with a phenomenon known as the “demographic dividend” where economic growth is spurred by the demographic transition (ibid). According to Bloom and Williamson (1998), around one-third of East Asian economic growth from 1965 to 1990 could be attributed to the increasingly large share of the working-age population. After a majority of East Asian countries including Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand implemented childbearing reduction policies in an attempt to slow population growth (Mason and Kinugasa, 2005), the region was met with a significant drop in fertility rates. As a result, families began to have less children, and the burden of childcare was reduced, freeing up funds for investment (Higgings and Williamson, 1997). Furthermore, with a smaller percentage of the dependent population, governments were able to invest more on the education and healthcare of each individual, developing a more educated and healthy workforce which boosted productivity (Becker et al., 1999). Many East Asian governments had also implemented economic policies and reforms, such as encouraging international trade and investing in infrastructure to maximize the positive economic effects brought about (World Bank, 1993). These demographic transitions resulted in an overall increase in the savings rate around East Asia and the Pacific, increasing from 27% to 37% of GDP (World Bank, 2021), contributing to the increased investment rates that fostered economic growth.

However, these positive effects do not remain forever. Once the working age population begins to age, a shortage in the labor force is often observed (Bloom et al., 2009). This decline in population may prove harmful towards government budgets in the long run, as smaller workforces tend to reduce total income, sales, and tax revenues (Pewtrusts, 2022). Moreover, increasing old-age dependency ratios and reduced school enrollments may weaken the productive capacity of the labor force in the long run (Bloom et al., 2009). Hence, the long-term consequences of dropping fertility rates may offset the short term gains.

The United States, for example, has been struggling with this issue of an aging population. As older adults typically have a higher demand for healthcare due to age-related health issues

(Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2023), an aging population would place significant burdens on public healthcare systems. Medicare, a federal health insurance program for adults aged 65 or over, is primarily funded by the government revenue gained from taxes and premiums. As the American population continues to age, the number of labor force participants contributing to the Medicare funds gradually decreases, relative to its beneficiaries. This places a strain on healthcare resources and financial stability of government funds (Board of Trustees, 2023). This combination of a weakening labor force and non-economically directed government spending halter the experiencing country's economic growth.

### How do Cultural Forces Shape Fertility Rates

Low fertility rates are not only attributed to economic concerns, but also to the ever changing social perception towards child bearing around the world. According to Feyrer et al. (2008), the fall in fertility rates in these advanced economies can be attributed to increasing women's status over time.

In the early 1900s, women were often expected to shoulder all child care responsibilities, resulting in most women specializing in home production and raising children. However, as the world continued to evolve, women were provided with better labor market opportunities and increased access to market work (ibid). Over the 20th century, women's rights evolved in specific ways that have increased the difficulty of bearing children. Countries have given women more rights to work, but social norms have not evolved at the same pace, and thus women are still expected to shoulder most of the childcare responsibilities. This puts women in a difficult position where they are supposed to manage impossible expectations of doing all the work at home while also working a fulltime job. As a result, women become disincentivized to bear children, leading to a drop in overall fertility rates. These social observations are not always the same for each country. Predetermined social differences cause a difference in the timing of changes in female status by country (ibid).

Japan, for example, has struggled heavily with this social problem. Despite the large amount of government spending and implementation of new legislation, the government is yet to find a way to reverse low fertility rates (Piser, 2023). Implementing seemingly good policies like increased childcare leave allowance and childcare provision have proven to be highly ineffective (Nagase, 2018).

The unsatisfactory response of the Japanese towards these policies may be a result of underlying cultural factors. Triggered by the collapse of the Japanese economic bubble in the 1990s, "Karōshi" or death from overwork in English, has been recognized as a significant social issue in Japan (Dickinson, 2023). The shrinking of the Japanese labor force caused by an aging population resulted in a subsequent labor shortage. As a result, high pressure working environments were created in an attempt to maintain productivity (ibid). Though the government has attempted to address this overworking culture, through the mandation of multiple karōshi prevention measures, the health of many workers remains a social concern as these work

traditions continue to persist (Otake, 2023).

Though mothers were provided with the luxury of taking up to 1 year's leave without the risk of unemployment, 40% of new mothers continued to quit their jobs, a result of corporate culture pushing women to quit upon marriage and childbirth. (Teramura, 2014; Nagase, 2018). In Japan, women are often treated unequally by co-workers, often looked down upon or sexually harassed (Santillanes, 2022). Taking maternity leave would only exacerbate these unfavorable conditions as women become less productive in their work life. Likewise, fathers refused to take paid childcare leave despite the longer amount of allowed time (ibid), indicating that workplace culture in Japan has a significant effect on parents' familial considerations (Eunmi and Brinton, 2015).

France, on the other hand, has managed to improve the social perception towards childbirth and marriage within the country. Though they have also observed demographic changes in the past, the longstanding pro-family policies implemented have supported increased birth rates as time went on (Volant et al., 2018). According to Letablier (2003), the prominent government support towards working mothers was a large contributory factor in boosting fertility rates. Policies aimed at altering societal values towards a more child-friendly environment, including stating state intervention in childcare as a public responsibility, has helped provide a more positive outlook towards childbearing.

Up to the 1960s, French women were frowned upon for working while having children or receiving government help in raising their children. This social perception stemmed from family policies which supported the traditional "male breadwinner model" which assigns males to be the sole source of income for a family (Letablier, 2003)). These schemes were aimed to confine women to the role of full-time caretaker as it was assumed to increase the quality of care obtained by the children and would increase fertility rates. Now, however, mothers no longer have to worry about such social perceptions as social norms in France are now more accepting towards women who continue to work while raising children (ibid).

### Historical Context of Japan's Economy and Fertility Policy

After the loss of 56 billion USD and 2.6 to 3.1 million lives at the end of World War II, Japan was able to sustain a miraculous strain of economic growth from 1945 to 1991 (Shiohara, 2023), buoyed with many large companies, a well-educated workforce, and subordination of other goals in favor of obtaining economic growth, Japan managed to propel many industrial and economic efficiencies (Crawford, 1998).

The surplus of individual firms that managed to gain large domestic and international market share, by making use of financial strength and connections, pushed Japan to become an economic powerhouse with a huge and advanced domestic market (ibid), making Japan become the second largest economy in the world in the 1960s (Masai et al., 2024). However, this economic bubble has now burst as Japan struggles to achieve that same level of economic efficiency, the country



is now heavily struggling with an aging workforce and low fertility rates. As more women begin to enter the labor market, young Japanese citizens become less inclined to have children (Nagase, 2018). With rising real estate and living prices, as well as static wages, young professionals often do not have the financial capacity to raise a family (Piser, 2023). In addition, interest in relationships and sex are gradually declining (ibid). These factors all contribute to the steep drop in the fertility rate.

Plagued with a shrinking working population and fertility, Shinzo Abe came into office in 2012 in an attempt to reverse the situation (Nagase, 2018), making use of child care provision focused policies in an attempt to boost fertility rates. Implementing policies that shortened work hours, increased government spending on childcare services, increasing childcare leave periods, and even mandating large firms to produce action plans for employees raising children, to ensure fair treatment. Though such policies have been shown to be effective in incentivizing families to have children, the scale of effectiveness has proven to be very little. Cultural and social factors continue to influence the public's perception towards having children. With the financial costs highly outweighing the social benefits brought about (Nagase, 2018).

Recently, Japan has attempted to reverse low fertility rates by making use of different methods. Predicted to cost an estimated 22 billion USD, Fumio Kishida plans to double child care spending and lift income caps for child cash benefits as of 2023. (Piser, 2023). These policies are likely implemented to combat the high living and housing costs experienced by young professionals to improve child raising capabilities.

### France's Fertility Policy

Regarded as another advanced economy, France has also had its share of fertility issues. However, unlike Japan, France has proven itself to be highly effective in implementing fertility boosting policies.

In the 1980s, the French government shifted from a pro-natalist approach, defined as the idea that it is important to have children in order to increase the number of people in a country (Cambridge Dictionary), in an attempt to support working mothers and foster the development of childcare facilities. Consequently, they began increasing government spending on childcare services (Letablier, 2003), later on declaring state intervention in childcare as a public responsibility, supporting employment and gender equality within the country.

France has taken a more flexible family model which provides support towards various family structures, including co-parenting and single-parent families which are supported by government policies (Chemin, 2015). Furthermore, mothers who chose to work while having children under the age of three are not considered bad mothers due to the accepting social norms (ibid).

From the educational sector, France has implemented universal enrollment of children under 6 years old. Furthermore, nursery

schools are also provided as a public good (free of charge). These policies resulted in boosting nursery school enrollment to 99% for children aged 3 to 6. Within the economic sector, the French government has also provided pension schemes, tax reductions based on family size, and even family subsidies, lowering the costs of raising a child within the country.

Such policies aimed at altering societal values and conditions towards a more child-friendly environment resulted in an altered social perception toward child care as the agenda of shared parental responsibility continues to spread and the public continues to support the notion of state responsibility in education, health, and well-being of children, incentivizing more families to bear children as financial burdens and public scrutiny has decreased (Letablier, 2003).

The cause of success in boosting fertility is not only limited to the changing local perceptions but also France's influx of immigrants. According to the French census, approximately 19% of births in 2017 were by immigrant mothers despite only making up 12% of the female population of child bearing age. The contributions supplied by immigrant mothers made up 0.1 of the 1.88 children per woman fertility rate in France (Volant, 2019).

### Comparative Analysis

Both Japan and France have taken different approaches in an attempt to address their fertility issues, with France seemingly having obtained larger success. In Japan, the fertility rates have remained low since the drop to 1.57 children per woman in 1989 (Nagase, 2018). Though the "womanomics" policies implemented by Shinzo Abe's cabinet were aimed to address this decline by increasing daycare availability, childcare allowances, and promoting a better work-life balance, the impact that such policies have had on fertility rates remained limited. Many policies, including the childcare leave program which allows parents to take up to one year's leave without the risk of unemployment, were highly unsuccessful (ibid). Policies aimed at increasing female labor participation by increasing infant care provision in urban areas saw a slight increase in labor participation of mothers with young children. However, this increase was not sustained as corporate culture continued to push women out of the workforce after marriage and childbirth, while the gender wage gap remained significant (Nagase, 2018; Teramura, 2014). Furthermore, the Japanese government has attempted to encourage men to take more active parenting roles which have been met with very limited success. Men refused to participate more often in child raising duties despite the introduction of parental leave and reduction of overtime work. Cultural norms within Japan continue to prevent males from participating actively in childcare.

France, however, has implemented many different family policies over several decades. These policies have been proven to be much more effective in increasing and stabilizing the country's fertility rates. Increasing from 1.7 to 1.9 from 1995 to the 2000s, France's gradually increasing fertility rates can be attributed to the generous maternity leave, subsidized child care, and family allowances (Feyrer et al., 2008). Providing

significant financial support to families, including tax breaks and childcare subsidies have created a better living environment to raise children (ibid). Policies that support working mothers by subsidizing child care and flexible working hours have proven to be effective in keeping women within the workforce. Female labor market participation rates continue to increase as the country continues to promote gender equality in the labor force (ibid). Unlike Japan, where parents are frowned upon for taking leave due to the overworking work culture, the French have only had a history of assigning women to focus solely on parenting (Letablier, 2003). Therefore, the French are generally more accepting towards women taking maternity leave as compared to the Japanese. Additionally, France has successfully promoted the involvement in childcare amongst males. Various policies including paternity leave have incentivized both parents to share childcare responsibilities which have proven to be highly effective. The cultural shift towards equal distribution of parental burden has been crucial to supporting higher fertility rates as the lower workload has reduced disincentives for women to have more children (ibid).

Though Japan has also implemented many policies similar to the French, the effectiveness of such policies have shown to be much less prominent. This is likely due to the social norms in France, which are generally more accepting to women who continue to work while raising children as opposed to the Japanese who refuse to take parental leave, in fear of being scrutinized and harming future employment opportunities due to the intense Japanese work cultures, and are showing less interest in having children as child care costs continue to rise and interest in sexual intercourse declines (Letablier, 2003; Feyrer et al., 2008).

### Policy Recommendations

In order to counter this fertility crisis, there are a number of recommendations that Japan should take in order to improve its situation. Firstly, Japan should continue to enhance its childcare services and accessibility. Though it may not have had a huge impact on fertility rates, this method has been proven to be effective in incentivising Japanese citizens to have children (Nagase, 2018). Secondly, an improvement in the work-life balance is imperative. Policies to reduce working hours and promoting flexibility ought to be continually promoted and implemented. Parents should be encouraged to manage both work and family life effectively, an approach which has shown to be effective in France (Feyrer et al., 2008).

Third, increasing parental involvement is crucial to boosting fertility rates as it has been proven to positively correlate with higher fertility rates. Japan's government should further expand paternal leave options and encourage fathers to take advantage of such policies. Though Japan is considered to have exceptional parental leave regulations, the broader unfavorable social stigmas reduce the effectiveness of these policies as parents refuse to take advantage of them. Thus, government mandated parental leave may be the key solution to their issue.

Switzerland, for example, had mandated paternity leave for new fathers in 2020 to increase male involvement in household duties

(Rosenblum, 2020), which may have influenced the increase in births per woman, rising from 1.46 to 1.52 from 2020 to 2021 (datacommons.org, 2021). Equally sharing childcare workload reduces the burden on mothers and promotes a healthy and balanced family environment.

Most importantly, Japan ought to foster a cultural shift towards gender equality and healthy work life balance both in the labor force and at home. The work culture that stigmatizes women for taking maternity leave, pushing them to quit upon childbirth, should be reversed. Such perceptions prevent the country from improving social acceptance and thus hurts fertility rates. The Japanese government should continue to promote parental leave options while also encouraging the adoption of flexible working hours amongst firms, providing parents with a safer social atmosphere and comfortability to take time off to focus on their families. The government should also mandate policies that provide equal opportunities for women and promote public awareness campaigns, like work discrimination awareness or gender inequality awareness campaigns, to shift societal attitudes towards more equitable gender roles.(Teramura, 2014).

Japan should learn from France's success in reversing societal gender norms and implementation of comprehensive family policies which create supportive environments for families (Nagase, 2018; Feyrer et al., 2008). The safe and healthy working environment which supports working mothers in France prevents mothers from being exposed to harmful and discouraging social norms which may impact their social well-being, leading to a reluctance of either working or having children due to the associated social stigma (ibid). The healthy family environment in France is a social model that the Japanese should aim to achieve as well.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Japanese government should attempt to structure their family-work environment in a similar model with the French. Though this may not sound as complicated on paper, the underlying cultural factors in Japanese society make this goal difficult to achieve. Many of the government policies enforced by previous Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, were similar to those implemented by the French government, providing both more flexible working hours for parents and providing a substantial amount of childcare services and child raising allowances (Nagase, 2018). Though these methods might seem to be effective, as it has been with the French, in reality, these policies have been observed to be far less effective in boosting fertility rates in comparison.

No matter what financial or work incentives the Japanese government plans to provide towards parents, if the issue of workplace discrimination is not addressed and the overworking culture remains prevalent, it will remain difficult for the Japanese government to reverse the declining fertility rates. Promoting a major shift in Japanese societal norms is an extremely challenging but crucial task that the government should aim to address if they want to boost fertility rates.

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